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Mindfulness

Mindfulness is about paying **moment-by-moment attention** to what's happening inside your body, and what's going on around you. That sounds simple, but it's amazingly easy to get distracted.

What is mindfulness?

When you have a shower, you wash the same bits, usually in the same order. Think back to your shower this morning. Ask yourself whether you actually remember washing each part – there's a very good chance you don't. You may have been focusing on how late you were running for work, or what you were going to wear or have for breakfast, or on an argument you had with your loved one.

And that lack of awareness matters. As we've lost touch with our physical environment, inside and out, our mind often wanders and we've started living inside our heads – and that's not a healthy place to spend all our time.

We tend to focus more and more on the stresses in our lives that we often can't solve easily, which can have an impact on our mental health. We don't just lose touch with our surroundings – we lose sight of those little moments that help us appreciate life and give us a boost of feel-good hormones.

How to be mindful

When you're outside – stop what you're doing right now (well, read through to the end of this paragraph first, or you won't know what to do next!). Close your eyes and just listen. What can you hear? For me, it's a faint roar of traffic – and bird calls I've zoned out all day. Next, touch something with your hands – the table in front of you, the clothes you're wearing on your legs. How do they actually feel? When was the last time you noticed?

Now take notice of what you're thinking. Sure, part of your brain is probably thinking 'that article said I need to take notice of what I'm thinking - but how is that going to help?' But being aware of what's going on inside your brain right now is the first step to learning how to keep focusing on the present, rather than drifting off and brooding about other worries.

How does mindfulness help us?

Mindfulness has gained in popularity very quickly, for good reason. Some people find that reconnecting with their surroundings helps to reduce stress gives them respite from [everyday worries](#) that can become overwhelming. Best of all, it doesn't need special training - although it definitely needs practice.

By reconnecting consciously with your external and internal environment, you can learn to become more aware of your surroundings all the time. As time goes on, you should feel more able to 'be in the moment' - which means less time spent on regrets of the past or worries for the future.

Mindfulness can help you to:

- Start taking pleasure in things in your surroundings you've been taking for granted.
- Become aware of how easy it is to get caught up in a spiral of unhelpful worries.
- See patterns of thoughts and feelings emerging. With time, you can learn to recognise when unhelpful flows of thought are taking over, and challenge and divert those patterns to more helpful and realistic thoughts.
- Recognise that thoughts are just 'mental events', and fight the temptation to let them control your mood and behaviour.
- Pick up early on signs of emerging stress, [anxiety](#) and [depression](#). This lets you use coping mechanisms to tackle them before they get out of control.
- Reduce the risk of depression, which can be triggered or fuelled by cycles of negative thoughts (automatic thoughts) arising from how you're feeling.

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) takes a pretty tough line on demanding high-quality evidence before it recommends anything. But it does recommend [mindfulness for preventing depression](#) for some people.

How to practise mindfulness

Don't even think about switching overnight to living a completely mindful life. You'll be amazed how quickly your mind gets distracted. But with a little practice, three minutes will become five, then ten - and in time, you'll learn to tune in again to your surroundings whatever you're doing.

Take yourself off autopilot

It's all too easy to do everyday tasks without thinking. If they're not fun, you might think that's not such a bad thing. But even taking time to smell the fresh clothes or feeling smooth cloth under your fingers while you're doing the ironing can bring back happy memories.

Harness the power

Use your mobile to set yourself a regular reminder (maybe during your lunch break) to make time for mindfulness exercises. You can download lots of free apps, which offer short tutorials to help us cultivate mindfulness which you can access each day.

Now switch off

Commit to 15 minutes technology-free while you practice mindfulness. It'll still be there when you get back!

Take the time

Find a slot in your day (ideally at the same time every day, so it becomes a routine) when you can set aside just 10-15 minutes to begin with. You may build that up over time, but the real key is to commit to taking that time out.

Get comfortable

You don't need to be sitting cross-legged with your palms outstretched. You don't need to be sitting in a sun-dappled garden. But ideally, you should be sitting in a comfortable environment.

Be present

Mindfulness isn't about achieving nirvana, or going into a peaceful trance. It's about paying attention to the here and now, and noting what's happening without passing judgement (either positive or negative).

Make a mental note

If you do find your mind wandering off on to a worry, acknowledge the concern, park it for later, and bring your thoughts back to the present. Doing a body scan or focusing on one element of your immediate surroundings – the feel of the sun on your face, the sound of distant traffic, your breathing – should help re-focus you.

Don't judge yourself

A bit like riding a bike, practising mindfulness comes naturally once you're used to it, but it's normal to find it tough to focus when you're starting out. Don't be hard on yourself if you can't cut off outside thoughts. When they start encroaching, just bring back your attention to the present moment.

Don't give up

You may find you can only focus for three minutes when you start – and that's just fine. Try to build up gradually, one minute at a time.

Further reading

- [How to manage and reduce stress](#); Mental Health Foundation guide, 2022
- [Hofmann SG, Gomez AF](#); Mindfulness-Based Interventions for Anxiety and Depression. *Psychiatr Clin North Am.* 2017 Dec;40(4):739–749. doi: 10.1016/j.psc.2017.08.008. Epub 2017 Sep 18.
- [Wielgosz J, Goldberg SB, Kral TRA, et al](#); Mindfulness Meditation and Psychopathology. *Annu Rev Clin Psychol.* 2019 May 7;15:285–316. doi: 10.1146/annurev-clinpsy-021815-093423. Epub 2018 Dec 10.
- [Zhang D, Lee EKP, Mak ECW, et al](#); Mindfulness-based interventions: an overall review. *Br Med Bull.* 2021 Jun 10;138(1):41–57. doi: 10.1093/bmb/ldab005.
- [Mindfulness](#); Mind.
- [Mindfulness](#); Mental Health Foundation.

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